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Judith Viorst

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To my three sons

Anthony Jacob Viorst

Nicholas Nathan Viorst

Alexander Noah Viorst

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Contents

It is the image in the mind that binds us to our lost treasures, but it is the loss that shapes the image.

—Colette

Introduction

After almost two decades of writing essentially about the inner world of children and adults, I decided that I wanted to learn more about the theoretical underpinnings of human psychology. I sought my education at a psychoanalytic institute because I believe that, with all of its imperfections, the psychoanalytic perspective offers the most profound insights into what we are and why we do what we do. At its best, psychoanalytic theory simply teaches us in another way what we have already been taught by Sophocles and Shakespeare and Dostoevsky. At its best, psychoanalytic theory offers us illuminating generalizations while maintaining an exquisite respect for the complexity and uniqueness of each of us astonishing human beings.

In 1981, after six years of study, I became a research graduate of the Washington Psychoanalytic Institute, which belongs to that international network of teaching and training institutes spawned by Sigmund Freud. During those years I also underwent an analysis and worked in several psychiatric settings—as an aide in a children's psychiatric ward, as a creative-writing teacher for emotionally disturbed adolescents and as a therapist at two clinics doing individual psychotherapy with adults. It seemed to me that wherever I looked, both inside and outside of hospitals, people—all of us—were struggling with issues of loss. Loss became the subject I had to write about.

When we think of loss we think of the loss, through death, of people we love. But loss is a far more encompassing theme in our life. For we lose not only through death, but also by leaving and being left, by changing and letting go and moving on. And our losses include not only our separations and departures from those

we love, but our conscious and unconscious losses of romantic dreams, impossible expectations, illusions of freedom and power, illusions of safety—and the loss of our own younger self, the self that thought it always would be unwrinkled and invulnerable and immortal.

Somewhat wrinkled, highly vulnerable and non-negotiably mortal, I have been examining these losses. These lifelong losses. These necessary losses. These losses we confront when we are confronted by the inescapable fact . . .

that our mother is going to leave us, and we will leave her;

that our mother's love can never be ours alone;

that what hurts us cannot always be kissed and made better;

that we are essentially out here on our own;

that we will have to accept—in other people and ourselves—the mingling of love with hate, of the good with the bad;

that no matter how wise and beautiful and charming a girl may be, she still cannot grow up to marry her dad;

that our options are constricted by anatomy and guilt;

that there are flaws in every human connection;

that our status on this planet is implacably impermanent;

and that we are utterly powerless to offer ourselves or those we love protection—protection from danger and pain, from the inroads of time, from the coming of age, from the coming of death; protection from our necessary losses.

These losses are a part of life—universal, unavoidable, inexorable. And these losses are necessary because we grow by losing and leaving and letting go.

This book is about the vital bond between our losses and gains. This book is about what we give up in order to grow.

For the road to human development is paved with renunciation. Throughout our life we grow by giving up. We give up some of our deepest attachments to others. We give up certain cherished parts of ourselves. We must confront, in the dreams we dream, as well as in our intimate relationships, all that we never will have and never will be. Passionate investment leaves us vulnerable to loss. And sometimes, no matter how clever we are, we must lose.

An eight-year-old was asked to provide a philosophical commentary on loss. A man of few words, he answered, "Losing sucks." At

any age we would surely agree that losing tends to be difficult and painful. Let us also consider the view that it is only through our losses that we become fully developed human beings.

In fact, I would like to propose that central to understanding our lives is understanding how we deal with loss. I would like to propose in this book that the people we are and the lives that we lead are determined, for better and worse, by our loss experiences.

Now I am not a psychoanalyst and I have not tried to write like one. Nor am I a strict Freudian, if that term is intended to describe someone who hews rigorously to Freud's doctrines and resists any modification or change. But I do unhesitatingly embrace Freud's conviction that our past, with all of its clamorous wishes and terrors and passions, inhabits our present, and his belief in the enormous power of our unconscious—of that region outside our awareness—to shape the events of our life. I also embrace his belief that consciousness helps, that recognizing what we're doing helps, and that our self-understanding can expand the realm of our choices and possibilities.

In preparing this book I have relied not only on Freud and a wide range of other psychoanalytic thinkers but on many of the poets and philosophers and novelists who have concerned themselves—directly or indirectly—with aspects of loss.* In addition, I have drawn heavily on my own personal experiences as a girl and a woman, as a mother and a daughter, as a wife and a sister and a friend. I have talked with analysts about their patients, with patients about their analyses, and with large numbers of the kind of people to whom this book is addressed: marriage-and-the-family people who worry about their mortgage payments, their periodontal problems, their sex life, their children's future, love and death. Virtually all of the names have been changed except for those of a handful or so of "famous" people, whose stories are identified as some sort of public testimony to the pervasiveness of issues of loss.

For our losses—the losses successively examined in the four parts of this book—are indeed pervasive.

* Those interested may turn to the "Notes and Elaborations" section for information on all source materials and for further—sometimes extensive—elaboration on many of the themes discussed in this book.

The losses entailed in moving away from the body and being of our mother and gradually becoming a separate self.

The losses involved in facing the limitations on our power and potential and deferring to what is forbidden and what is impossible.

The losses of relinquishing our dreams of ideal relationships for the human realities of imperfect connections.

And the losses—the multiple losses—of the second half of life, of our final losing, leaving, letting go.

Examining these losses does not make for merry remedies like *Winning Through Losing* or *The Joy of Loss*. Our junior philosopher said it: Losing sucks. But to look at loss is to see how inextricably our losses are linked to growth. And to start to become aware of the ways in which our responses to loss have shaped our lives can be the beginning of wisdom and hopeful change.

JUDITH VIORST
Washington, D.C.

I The Separate Self

There is no ache more
Deadly than the striving
to be oneself.

—Yevgeniy Vinokurov

1

The High Cost of Separation

Then there is the matter of my mother's abandonment of me. Again, this is the common experience. They walk ahead of us, and walk too fast, and forget us, they are so lost in thoughts of their own, and soon or late they disappear. The only mystery is that we expect it to be otherwise.

—Marilynne Robinson

We begin life with loss. We are cast from the womb without an apartment, a charge plate, a job or a car. We are sucking, sobbing, clinging, helpless babies. Our mother interposes herself between us and the world, protecting us from overwhelming anxiety. We shall have no greater need than this need for our mother.

Babies need mothers. Sometimes lawyers, housewives, pilots, writers and electricians also need mothers. In the early years of life we embark on the process of giving up what we have to give up to be separate human beings. But until we can learn to tolerate our physical and psychological separateness, our need for our mother's presence—our mother's literal, actual presence—is absolute.

For it's hard to become a separate self, to separate both literally and emotionally, to be able to outwardly stand alone and to inwardly feel ourselves to be distinct. There are losses we'll have to sustain, though they may be balanced by our gains, as we move away from the body and being of our mother. But if our mother *leaves us*—when we are too young, too unprepared, too scared, too

helpless—the cost of this leaving, the cost of this loss, the cost of this separation may be too high.

There is a time to separate from our mother.

But unless we are ready to separate—unless we are ready to leave her and be left—anything is better than separation.

A young boy lies in a hospital bed. He is frightened and in pain. Burns cover 40 percent of his small body. Someone has doused him with alcohol and then, unimaginably, has set him on fire.

He cries for his mother.

His mother has set him on fire.

It doesn't seem to matter what kind of mother a child has lost, or how perilous it may be to dwell in her presence. It doesn't matter whether she hurts or hugs. Separation from mother is worse than being in her arms when the bombs are exploding. Separation from mother is sometimes worse than being with her when she is the bomb.

For the presence of mother—our mother—stands for safety. Fear of her loss is the earliest terror we know. "There is no such thing as a baby," writes psychoanalyst-pediatrician D. W. Winnicott, observing that babies in fact can't exist without mothers. Separation anxiety derives from the literal truth that without a caretaking presence we would die.

A father, of course, can be that caretaking presence. We'll look at his place in our life in Chapter Five. But the caretaking person I'll speak of here will be—because it usually is—our mother, from whom we can endure anything but abandonment.

Yet all of us are abandoned by our mother. She leaves us before we can know that she will return. She abandons us to work, to market, to go on vacation, to have another baby—or simply by not being there when we have need of her. She abandons us by having a separate life, a life of her own—and we will have to learn to have one too. But meanwhile, what do we do when we need our mother—we need our mother!—and she is not there?

What we doubtless do is survive. We surely survive the brief and temporary absences. But they teach us a fear that may set its mark on our life. And if, in early childhood, most especially within the

first six years, we are too deprived of the mother we need and long for, we may sustain an injury emotionally equivalent to being doused with oil and set on fire. Indeed, such deprivation in the first few years of life has been compared to a massive burn or wound. The pain is unimaginable. The healing is hard and slow. The damage, although not fatal, may be permanent.

Selena must confront the damage every weekday morning when her sons leave for school and her husband leaves for work and, hearing her apartment door slam shut for the final time, "I feel lonely, abandoned, petrified. I need hours to compose myself. What would happen if people didn't come back?"

In the late 1930s, in Germany, when Selena was six months old, her mother began the struggle to keep them alive, departing each day to queue up for food and negotiate with the bureaucracy that was making it harder and harder for Jews to survive. Out of desperate necessity, Selena was left all alone, fed by a bottle, penned up in a crib—and if she cried, her tears had dried when, several hours later, her mother came home again.

Everyone who knew her then agrees that Selena was quite wonderfully good—a placid, undemanding, sweet-natured child. And if you encountered her now you might believe that you were seeing a bright, blithe spirit, happily untouched by what must have been experiences of harrowing loss.

She has been touched.

Selena is prone to depression. She is terrified of the unknown. "I don't like adventure. I don't like anything new." She says that her earliest memories are of anxiously wondering what would happen next. "I am frightened," she says, "of whatever is not familiar."

She also is frightened of too much responsibility—"I'd like someone to take care of me all of the time." And while she functions quite adequately as good mother and dutiful wife, she has also arranged—through a strong, steady husband and numerous older friends—for some surrogate mothering.

Women often envy Selena. She is funny and charming and warm. She can bake, she can sew, she likes music, she likes a good

laugh. She has a Phi Beta Kappa key, two masters' degrees, a part-time teaching job. And with her narrow child's body, enormous brown eyes and elegant cheekbones, she strikingly resembles the young Audrey Hepburn.

Except that, in her late forties, she remains the *young* Audrey Hepburn, rather less a woman than a girl. And she finally has identified what she says "wakes me up every morning of my life with a bad taste in my mouth and pains in my stomach."

It is anger, she says—"lots of anger. I think I feel cheated."

This thought is not acceptable to Selena. Why isn't she simply grateful to be alive? She observes that six million Jews died and that all she suffered was the absence of her mother. The damage, she says, although permanent, is not fatal.

It is just in the last four decades, in the years since Selena's birth, that attention has fully been paid to the high cost of mother-loss, to both the immediate suffering and the future consequences of even fairly short-term separations. A child apart from his mother may show separation reactions which can last long after they are together again—problems with eating and sleeping, breakdowns of bladder and bowel control and even a decline in the number of words he uses. Furthermore, as early as six months old he may become, not merely weepy and sad, but gravely depressed. And tied in with the above is that painful feeling known as separation anxiety, which includes both the fear—when mother is gone—of the dangers he faces without her, and the fear—when they are together—that he will lose her again.

I am intimately acquainted with some of these symptoms and some of these fears, for they followed my spending three months —at age four—in a hospital, three virtually motherless months because the hospitals of that time rigidly restricted visiting hours. Years after I had recovered from the illness for which I'd been hospitalized, I suffered from the effects of the hospitalization. And among the manifestations of my separation anxiety was my newly acquired habit—which continued until my middle teens—of sleepwalking.

An example: One balmy autumn night, when I was six years old

and my parents—to my distress—had gone out for the evening, I climbed out of bed without waking up from my sleep. Wandering into the living room, I slipped right past my dozing baby sitter, opened the front door and left the house. And then, still sound asleep, I walked to the corner and crossed the busy intersection, arriving at last at the goal of my somnambulistic journeying—the fire station.

"What do you want, little girl?" asked an astonished but extremely gentle fireman, trying not to frighten me awake.

I am told that, still in my sleeping state, I answered, loud and clear and without hesitation, "I want the firemen to find my mommy."

A six-year-old can desperately want her mommy.

A six-month-old can desperately want mommy too.

For by six months or so a child can form a mental image of his absent mother. He remembers and wants her specifically and the fact that she isn't present gives him pain. And swept with insistent needs that only his mother, his missing mother, can fulfill, he feels profoundly helpless and deprived. The younger the child the less time it takes—once he tunes in to his mother—before her absence is felt as a permanent loss. And while familiar substitute care will help him to tolerate everyday separations, it is not until age three that he gradually comes to understand that the mother who is not there is alive and intact in another place—and will return to him.

Except that the wait for mother's return may feel interminable —may feel like forever.

For we need to keep in mind that time accelerates with the years, and that once we measured time in a different way, that once an hour was a day and a day was a month and a month was surely an eternity. Small wonder then that as children we may grieve our missing mother the way that as adults we grieve our dead. Small wonder then that, when a child is taken from his mother, "the frustration and longing may send him frantic with grief."

Absence makes the heart grow frantic, not fonder.

Absence, in fact, produces a typical sequence of responses: protest; despair; and, finally, detachment. Take a child from his mother and put him with strangers in a strange place and he will

find the living arrangements intolerable. He will scream, he will weep, he will thrash about. He will eagerly, desperately search for his missing mother. He will protest because he has hope, but after a while, when she doesn't come . . . and doesn't come . . . protest will turn to despair, to a state of muted, low-key yearning that may harbor an unutterable sorrow.

Listen to Anna Freud's description of Patrick, three years and two months, who was sent during World War II to England's Hampstead Nursery, and who

> assured himself and anybody who cared to listen with the greatest show of confidence that his mother would come for him, that she would put on his overcoat and would take him home with her again. . . .
>
> Later an ever-growing list of clothes that his mother was supposed to put on him was added: "She will put on my overcoat and my leggings, she will zip up the zipper, she will put on my pixie hat."
>
> When the repetitions of this formula became monotonous and endless, somebody asked him whether he could not stop saying it all over again. . . . He stopped repeating the formula aloud but his moving lips showed that he was saying it over and over to himself.
>
> At the same time he substituted for the spoken word gestures that showed the position of his pixie hat, the putting on of an imaginary coat, the zipping of the zipper, etc. . . . While the other children were mostly busy with their toys, playing games, making music, etc., Patrick, totally uninterested, would stand somewhere in a corner, [and] move his hands and lips with an absolutely tragic expression on his face.

Because the need for a mother is so powerful, most children emerge from despair and seek mother-substitutes. And because of this need it makes sense to assume that when the beloved long-lost mother returns, her child will throw himself joyously into her arms.

This isn't what happens.

For surprisingly enough, many children—especially under age three—may greet their returning mother very coldly, treating her with a distance, a blankness, that almost seems to say, "I never saw this lady before in my life." This response is called detach-

ment—it is a shutdown of loving feelings—and it deals with loss in a number of different ways: It punishes the person for having left. It serves as a masked expression of rage, for intense and violent hatred is one of the chief responses to being abandoned. And it also may be a defense—which can last for hours, or days, or a lifetime—a defense against the agony of ever loving, and ever losing, again.

Absence makes the heart grow frozen, not fonder.

And if this absence is, in fact, the absence of any stable parent figure, if childhood is a series of such separations, what then? Psychoanalyst Selma Fraiberg describes a sixteen-year-old boy who filed a lawsuit in Alameda County, seeking a half million dollars on the grounds that in sixteen years he had been placed in sixteen different foster homes. What is it, exactly—the damage for which he is suing? He answers that "it's like a scar on your brain."

One of the funniest men in the world, the astute political humorist Art Buchwald, is an expert on foster homes and scars on the brain. He discussed them with me in his Washington office—an office as unpretentious as its owner—where, in the course of the afternoon, I found myself moved less to laughter than to tears.

Art's is, in a way, a classic story of separation and loss in households with little money and few family resources. His mother died while Art was still an infant. His father was left with three daughters and one baby boy. He did what he could—he tried to find safe placements for his children and he visited conscientiously once a week, becoming a "Sunday father" while Art "decided very young that I was not going to get too involved with anybody."

In his first sixteen years Art lived in seven households, all in New York, beginning with a Seventh-Day Adventists home, where, he says, "there was hell and damnation and going to church on Saturday, and my father coming with kosher every Sunday. It was very confusing."

Next was a home in Brooklyn and then a stay at the Hebrew Orphan Asylum which are, Art deadpans, "the three worst words in the language. *Hebrew* means you're Jewish. *Orphan* means you don't have any parents. And *asylum* . . ." After the HOA there was

a placement with a lady who initially took in all four Buchwald children and then, a year or so later, decided that four was two too many and that Art and one of his sisters would have to go. Thus followed another foster home, and another foster home, and then a final year in his own father's house. And then he ran away to join the Marine Corps where, he says, he first found a sense of belonging, of being cared for.

At an early age Art concluded that life was "me against the world." He also learned early to hide behind a smile. He says he quickly discovered that "if I put a big smile on my face, people were nicer to me. And so," he says, quite matter-of-factly, "I smiled."

Years later—long after the foster homes, and the Marine Corps, and the struggle to make it as a writer—the anger beneath that smile could no longer be leashed. Looking for an object to attack, to hurt, to destroy, Art found . . . himself. Depression, in one definition, is anger turned inward. Midway into his thirties, Art, that funny fellow, became severely depressed.

The depression had followed a move, "a very emotional move," from Paris, where he had lived and worked for fourteen years. Settled in Washington, D.C., with his wife and three children, he was famous, successful, admired, liked and—in pain. "In everybody's mind I had it made, except mine," he says. "I was really desperate. I really needed help."

Recognizing that the time had come for ironing certain things out, Art decided to enter psychoanalysis, in the course of which he began to examine some of the early experiences which continued to cast their shadow on his life. Making him a loner. Making him unable to trust. Making him feel guilty for what he'd achieved—"Who am *I* to have *this?*" And making him afraid that sooner or later it would all be taken away from him. He also examined his rage, eventually coming to understand that "it wasn't a sin to be angry at my father" and that "it also wasn't irrational to be angry at a mother I never knew."

Art says now of the analysis that it saved his life, even though in a twist which sounds almost like fiction—trashy fiction—his analyst unexpectedly died of a heart attack. "I finally trust someone," says Art, "and he dies!" But the work that they did together has

continued to reverberate through the years. ("A good analysis," Art observes, "is when five years later something happens and you suddenly say, 'Oh, yeah, *that's* what he meant.' ") In his fifties Art finally feels at peace with himself.

"I'm better at trusting. I'm not so fearful of people hurting me. I'm closer to my wife and to my kids." He still has problems with intimacy—"One-on-one is the toughest. One-on-a-thousand," he says, "is much easier." And he still is afraid of anger. "I don't handle it very well. I'll do anything to avoid getting angry."

But Art is less angry these days. He is enjoying his success. Standing on stage at the Kennedy Center, entertaining the President of the United States and assorted other power brokers and superstars, he smiles his winning smile and tells himself, "Oh, if my Jewish father could see me now." He says that in part his success represents "revenge on about ten people, all dead and buried."

He says that he understands about scars on the brain.

Severe separations in early life leave emotional scars on the brain because they assault the essential human connection: The mother-child bond which teaches us that we are lovable. The mother-child bond which teaches us how to love. We cannot be whole human beings—indeed, we may find it hard to be human—without the sustenance of this first attachment.

And yet it has been argued that the need for others is not a primary instinct, that love is merely a glorious side effect. The classic Freudian view is that babies find, in the feeding experience, relief from hunger and other oral tensions and that, in repeated encounters of sucking and sipping and sweet satiation, they begin to equate satisfaction with human contact. In the early months of life a meal is a meal and gratification is gratification. Interchangeable sources can fill all needs. In time the who—the mother—becomes as important as the what—the body relief. But love for mother begins with what Anna Freud calls "stomach love." Love for mother, or so this theory has it, is an acquired taste.

There is an alternative view, which holds that the need for human connection is fundamental. It argues that we are wired for

love from the start. "The love of others comes into being," wrote psychotherapist Ian Suttie some fifty years ago, "simultaneously *with the recognition of their existence.*" In other words we love as soon as we learn to distinguish a separate "you" and "me." Love is our attempt to assuage the terror and isolation of that separateness.

The best-known spokesman today for the view that mother-need is innate is the British psychoanalyst John Bowlby, who notes that babies—like calves and ducklings and lambs and young chimpanzees—behave in ways that keep them close to their mother. He calls this "attachment behavior" and says that attachment has the biological function of self-preservation, of keeping the young safe from harm. By remaining close to mother the baby chimp finds protection from predators that might kill him. By remaining close to mother, baby humans find protection from danger too.

It is generally agreed that by six to eight months most babies have formed a specific mother attachment. It is then that we all, for the first time, fall in love. And whether or not that love is linked, as I am convinced it must be, to a fundamental need for human attachment, it possesses an intensity which will make us exquisitely vulnerable to the loss—or even the threat of loss—of a loved one.

And if, as I am convinced it must be, a reliable early attachment is vitally important to healthy development, the cost of breaking that crucial bond—the cost of separation—may be high.

The cost of separation is high when a too-young child is left too long alone, or is passed from foster home to foster home, or is placed in a nursery—even Anna Freud's nursery—by a mother who says that she will (but will she?) come back. The cost of separation is high even in caring family situations when a divorce, a hospital stay, a geographical or emotional pulling away fragments a child's connection with his mother.

The cost of separation may also be high when working mothers cannot find or pay for adequate child care—and more than half of those with children under the age of six now go to work! The women's movement and simple urgent economic necessity are sending millions of women into the job market. But the question,

"What shall I do with my kids?" requires better answers than are offered by twelve-hour custodial day-care centers.

"In the years when a baby and his parents make their first enduring human partnerships," writes Selma Fraiberg, "when love, trust, joy and self-valuation emerge through the nurturing love of human partners, millions of small children in our land may be learning . . . in our baby banks . . . that all adults are interchangeable, that love is capricious, that human attachment is a perilous investment and that love should be hoarded for the self in the service of survival."

The cost of separation is often high.

Now of course there will be separations in early childhood. And they may indeed produce distress and pain. But most normal separations, within the context of a stable, caring relationship, aren't likely to leave us with scars on the brain. And yes, working mothers and babies can establish a loving, trusting human bond.

But when separation imperils that early attachment, it is difficult to build confidence, to build trust, to acquire the conviction that throughout the course of our life we will—and deserve to—find others to meet our needs. And when our first connections are unreliable or broken or impaired, we may transfer that experience, and our responses to that experience, onto what we expect from our children, our friends, our marriage partner, even our business partner.

Expecting to be abandoned, we hang on for dearest life: "Don't leave me. Without you I'm nothing. Without you I'll die."

Expecting to be betrayed, we seize on every flaw and lapse: "You see—I might have known I couldn't trust you."

Expecting to be refused, we make excessive aggressive demands, furious in advance that they will not be met.

Expecting to be disappointed, we make certain that, soon or late, we are disappointed.

Fearful of separation, we establish what Bowlby calls anxious and angry attachments. And frequently we bring about what we fear. Driving away those we love by our clinging dependency. Driving away those we love by our needy rage. Fearful of separation, we repeat without remembering our history, imposing upon

new sets, new actors and a new production our unrecollected but still-so-potent past.

For no one is suggesting that we consciously remember experiences of early childhood loss, if by remember we mean that we can summon up a picture of mother leaving, of being alone in a crib. What stays with us instead is what it surely must have felt like to be powerless and needy and alone. Forty years later, a door slams shut, and a woman is swept with waves of primitive terror. That anxiety is her "memory" of loss.

Loss gives rise to anxiety when the loss is either impending or thought to be temporary. Anxiety contains a kernel of hope. But when loss appears to be permanent, anxiety—protest—gives way to depression—despair—and we may not only feel lonely and sad but responsible ("I drove her away") and helpless ("I can do nothing to bring her back") and unlovable ("There is something about me that makes me unworthy of love") and hopeless ("Therefore I'll feel this way forever!").

Studies show that early childhood losses make us sensitive to losses we encounter later on. And so, in mid-life, our response to a death in the family, a divorce, the loss of a job, may be a severe depression—the response of that helpless and hopeless, and angry, child.

Anxiety is painful. Depression is painful. Perhaps it is safer not to experience loss. And while we indeed may be powerless to prevent a death or divorce—or our mother from leaving us—we can develop strategies that defend us against the pain of separation.

Emotional detachment is one such defense. We cannot lose someone we care for if we don't care. The child who wants his mother and whose mother, again and again and again, isn't there, may learn that loving and needing hurt too much. And he may, in his future relationships, ask and give little, invest almost nothing at all, and become detached—like a rock—because "a rock," as a sixties song tells us, "feels no pain. And an island never cries."

Another defense against loss may be a compulsive need to take care of other people. Instead of aching, we help those who ache. And through our kind ministrations, we both alleviate our old, old sense of helplessness and identify with those we care for so well.

A third defense is a premature autonomy. We claim our indepen-

dence far too soon. We learn at an early age not to let our survival depend on the help or love of anyone. We dress the helpless child in the brittle armor of the self-reliant adult.

These losses we have been looking at—these premature separations of early childhood—may skew our expectations and our responses, may skew our subsequent dealings with the necessary losses of our life. In Marilynne Robinson's extraordinary novel *Housekeeping*, her desolate heroine ponders the power of loss, remembering "when my mother left me waiting for her, and established in me the habit of waiting and expectation which makes any present moment most significant for what it does not contain."

Absence, she reminds us, can become "gigantic and multiple."

Loss can dwell within us all our life.

2

The Ultimate Connection

For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge

All of our loss experiences hark back to Original Loss, the loss of that ultimate mother-child connection. For before we begin to encounter the inevitable separations of everyday life, we live in a state of oneness with our mother. This ideal state, this state of boundarylessness, this I-am-you-are-me-is-she-is-we, this "harmonious interpenetrating mix-up," this floating "I'm in the milk and the milk's in me," this chillproof insulation from aloneness and intimations of mortality: This is a condition known to lovers, saints, psychotics, druggies and infants. It is called bliss.

Our original bliss connection is the umbilical connection, the biological oneness of the womb. Outside the womb we experience the gratifying delusion that we and our mother share a common boundary. Our lifelong yearning for union, so some psychoanalysts say, originates in our yearning to return—to return, if not to the womb, then to this state of illusory union called symbiosis, a state "for which deep down in the original primal unconscious . . . every human being strives."

We have no conscious memories of being there—or leaving. But once it was ours, and we had to let it go. And while the cruel game of giving up what we love in order to grow must be replayed at each new stage of development, this is our first, perhaps hardest, renunciation.

The losing, leaving, letting go of paradise.

And although we do not remember it, we also never forget it. We acknowledge a paradise and a paradise lost. We acknowledge a time of harmony, wholeness, unbreachable safety, unconditional love, and a time when that wholeness was irretrievably rent. We acknowledge it in religion and myth and fairy tales and our conscious and unconscious fantasies. We acknowledge it as reality or as dream. And while we fiercely protect the boundaries of self that clearly demark the you from the me, we also yearn to recapture the lost paradise of that ultimate connection.

Our pursuit of this connection—of the restoration of oneness—may be an act of sickness or of health, may be a fearful retreat from the world or an effort to expand it, may be deliberate or unaware. Through sex, through religion, through nature, through art, through drugs, through meditation, even through jogging, we try to blur the boundaries that divide us. We try to escape the imprisonment of separateness. We sometimes succeed.

Sometimes in fleeting moments—moments of sexual ecstasy, for instance—we find ourself returned to oneness again, though it may not be until after, "After Love," as Maxine Kumin's fine poem would have it, that we can begin to sort out where we have been:

> Afterwards, the compromise.
> Bodies resume their boundaries.
>
> These legs, for instance, mine.
> Your arms take you back in.
>
> Spoons of our fingers, lips
> admit their ownership.
> . . . . . .
>
> Nothing is changed, except
> there was a moment when
>
> the wolf, the mongering wolf
> who stands outside the self
>
> lay lightly down, and slept.

It is argued that this experience—the physical merging that

sexual union may bring—takes us back to the oneness of our infancy. Indeed, analyst Robert Bak calls orgasm "the perfect compromise between love and death," the means by which we repair the separation of mother and child through the momentary extinction of the self. It is true that few of us consciously climb into a lover's bed in the hope of finding our mommy between the sheets. But the sexual loss of our separateness (which may scare some people so badly they cannot have orgasms) brings us pleasure, in part, because it unconsciously repeats our first connection.

Certainly Lady Chatterley provides us, for all time, with a vision of self-dissolving orgastic bliss as "further and further rolled waves of herself away from herself," until "the quick of all her plasm was touched, she knew herself touched . . . and she was gone." Another woman, describing a similar loss-of-self experience, says, "Coming makes me feel that I've come home."

But orgasm isn't the only means of extinguishing the self, of putting the watchful mongering wolf to sleep. There are many different highways that can carry us beyond our personal boundaries.

I, for example, have frequently sat (or is it *levitated?*) in my dentist's chair, adrift in a happy haze of nitrous oxide, feeling—as another user of this gas has put it—"as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our difficulties and troubles, were melted into unity." The man I'm quoting here is the philosopher/psychologist William James, but a variety of respectable—and not so respectable—types have also testified to the power of drugs to bring them to this condition of . . . melted unity.

For others, harmonious oneness can best be achieved through the natural world, through a breaking down of the wall between man and nature, permitting some of us—some of the time—"to return from the solitude of individuation into the consciousness of unity with all that is. . . ." There are those who have never felt this union with earth and heaven and sea, and those who—like Woody Allen—have always stoutly maintained that "I am two with nature." But some men and women find solace and joy not only in *seeing* but also in *being* nature—in being, temporarily, a part of "one vast world-encircling harmony."

Great art can also—sometimes—erase the line between viewer and viewed in what writer Annie Dillard calls "pure moments," astonishing moments she says that "I'll bear with me to my grave," moments during which "I stood planted, open-mouthed, born, before that one particular canvas, that river, up to my neck, gasping, lost, receding into watercolor depth . . . buoyant, awed, and had to be literally hauled away."

There are special religious experiences that can also re-create a state of oneness. Indeed, religious revelation can so irrefutably penetrate the soul that—these are Saint Teresa's words—"when she [the soul] returns to herself, it is wholly impossible for her to doubt that she has been in God, and God in her."

Mystical union is possible through a variety of transcendental experiences. Mystical union puts an end to self. And whether this union occurs between man and woman, man and cosmos, man and artistic creation or man and God, it repeats and restores—for brief, exquisite moments—the oceanic feeling of that mother-child connection where "the *me*, and the *we*, the *thou*, are not found, for in the One there can be no distinction."

Still, we try to make some distinctions: Between the psychotic and the saint. Between the moonstruck fanatic and the truly religious. We may challenge the legitimacy of drug- or drink-inspired cosmic union, and doubt the soundness of robed and sandaled cultists who exclaim: "Ecstatically, I merged into the mass, tasting the glorious pleasure that accompanies the loss of ego."

In other words, we may feel that oneness is fine if it isn't crazy, desperate or permanent—fine for folks to temporarily vanish into a painting, not fine if they vanish forever into a cult. We also may feel more accepting of Saint Teresa's divine experiences than we do of some pothead's stoned apprehension of God. And we may want to differentiate the sex life of a more-or-less healthy adult from sex which is just symbiosis, from sex which is nothing more than a fearful flight from separateness.

For analysts now tell us that vaginal orgasm, once regarded as the hallmark of female sexual maturity, may be rapturously experienced by severely troubled women who are merging in fantasy

not with a man but a mother. Men also seek mommies through sex: A male patient reports that whenever he found himself "thinking crazily," he could relieve his "craziness" by paying a prostitute to lie in a nude embrace with him until he felt himself "melting into her body."

Clearly, merging can sometimes be no more than symbiosis—a desperate return to clinging, helpless infancy. Indeed, to be stuck —fixated—at the symbiotic phase or to return—regress—to this phase in ways that take over our life would indicate that we were emotionally ill. The severe mental illness called childhood symbiotic psychosis, and most adult schizophrenia as well, are believed to involve a failure to build or maintain the boundaries that separate self from others. The result is that "I am not I, You are not You, also You are not I; I am at the same time I and You, You are at the same time You and I. I am confused whether You are I or I You."

At its very craziest, this merger of You and I may be frantic and frightened and furious, colored more with hatred than with love. The feeling is: "I can't live with—or without—her." The feeling is: "She is smothering me but her presence makes me real, lets me survive." At its very craziest, with intimacy intolerable and a separate existence seemingly impossible, oneness may be not bliss, but raging necessity.

We are looking at serious illness—at psychosis. But problems with symbiosis can also produce less extreme emotional difficulties.

Consider Mrs. C, attractive and childlike at age thirty, who slept with her mother until she was twenty years old, after which she found herself a tolerant and womanly man to marry. Mrs. C lives in the apartment above her mother, who does all her housework and generally runs her life, and she cannot contemplate moving to a more convenient location without becoming physically ill. Mrs. C has a symbiotic *neurosis,* for unlike symbiotic psychotic children, important parts of her development were quite normal. And yet in other parts of her life she behaves and unconsciously views herself as only one half of a symbiotic duo. She also unconsciously fears that if this duo were broken up, neither she nor her mother could survive.

Mrs. C and her mother shared from the start of Mrs. C's life an anxious and clinging symbiotic relationship. No wonder, we sagely observe, that she can't leave. But even the healthiest mother-child union may stand in the way of subsequent separateness, for as analyst Harold Searles observes: "Probably the greatest reason why we tend to rebel against our developing individual identity is because we feel it to have come between, and to be coming increasingly between, ourself and the mother with whom we once shared a world-embracing oneness."

We must count among our necessary losses the giving up of this world-embracing oneness.

We will never give up wanting to retrieve it.

Yes, we all have oneness wishes, but for some—not especially crazy—men and women these wishes may secretly dominate their life, penetrating all their important relationships and influencing all their important decisions. A woman, trying to choose between two attractive marriage proposals, made her choice while out to dinner one night when her escort scooped up a morsel of food and spooned it—like a mommy—into her mouth. This man's compelling, tacit promise of infantile gratifications immediately brought an end to her indecision. He was her choice.

Analyst Sydney Smith says that for such people—in contrast to the rest of us—the universal longing for oneness has not been benignly cordoned off. Instead it establishes itself as a central, tenacious, life-shaping "golden fantasy" which, in the course of psychoanalytic treatment, may slowly and reluctantly be revealed.

"I have always felt," says one of Dr. Smith's patients, "there is a remote person somewhere who would do everything for me, somebody who would fulfill every need in some magical fairylike manner and see to it I would be able to get whatever I want without putting out any effort for it. . . . I have never lived without all this stuff being there in the background. I don't know if I can."

Living with golden fantasies of an endlessly nurtured infancy can be a neurotic refusal to grow up. But the yearning for moments of oneness, the yearning to now and then suspend the dif-

ferences between the other and self, the yearning to recapture a mental state that resembles our early union with mother, is not in itself abnormal or undesirable.

For experiences of oneness can give us a respite from the solitude of separateness.

And experiences of oneness can help us transcend our former limits, can help us grow.

Analysts call the constructive return to some earlier stage of development "regression in the service of the ego." They mean that we are thereby enriched and enhanced. They mean that by taking a backward step we sometimes are able to forward our development. "To merge in order to reemerge," writes psychoanalyst Gilbert Rose, "may be part of the fundamental process of psychological growth. . . ."

In an intriguing book called *The Search for Oneness*, three psychologists make some dazzling claims for the potential benefits of oneness experiences. They present a hypothesis, supported by laboratory experiments, that the inducement of symbiotic-like fantasies—fantasies of oneness—can help schizophrenics to think and act less crazy and, in conjunction with behavior-modification techniques, can improve students' school performance, ease the fears of phobics and help smokers give up cigarettes, drinkers alcohol and dieters food!

These results were actually produced, write the authors, in controlled experiments in which subjects were exposed to a subliminal message (a message flashed before a viewer's eyes so fast that he isn't aware of seeing it), a message that said:

MOMMY AND I ARE ONE.

What were the experimenters doing? And why exactly do they think it worked?

We have already seen that oneness wishes persist into adult life and that—as Mrs. C and the spoonfed lady and Dr. Smith's patients clearly show us—they often can powerfully motivate behavior. The authors therefore argue that if unfulfilled yearnings for oneness can produce psychotic and other disturbed behavior, then perhaps the fulfillment—in fantasy—of this wish to be nurtured, protected, perfected, safe could have a wide range of beneficial effects.

The trick, then, is to arrange for fulfillment in fantasy. How?

Like a dream we forget upon wakening but which leaves us feeling good or bad all day, some fantasies work upon us outside our awareness. And the fantasy of oneness may be stirred, the authors say, by the subliminal message that MOMMY AND I ARE ONE. The authors go on to demonstrate that, with several important exceptions, this message produces good feelings and positive change, which, whether or not these good feelings and changes endure, may offer proof of the psychic value of oneness fantasies.

An example: Two groups of obese women went through a diet-counseling program. Both of the groups succeeded in losing weight. But the group of women exposed to the subliminal oneness message lost more weight than the women who were not.

Another example: Disturbed adolescents treated in a residential center took reading tests; their scores were compared with the scores of the previous year. The entire group had improved but the scores of those who had been exposed to the oneness message had improved four times as much as those who had not.

And another example: One month after the end of a program to help smokers give up cigarettes, a check was made on how many still abstained. The figure was 67 percent for those exposed to the MOMMY AND I ARE ONE message. It was 12½ percent for those who were not.

I don't think we need to conclude from all this that MOMMY AND I ARE ONE subliminal messages are destined to be the therapy of the future. Nor, as we have seen, are they required to get some oneness into our life. In bed, in church, in art museums, in unexpected boundary-softening moments, we gratify our lifelong wish for oneness. These fleeting fulfillments, these fusions, are experiences of grace that can deepen, rather than threaten, our sense of self.

"No one," writes Harold Searles, "becomes so fully an individual, so fully 'mature,' as to have lost his previously achieved capacity for symbiotic relatedness." But sometimes it feels that we have. Sometimes the wolf, the mongering wolf who stands outside the self, will not drop its guard, will not lie down and sleep. Sometimes we are too terrified to allow it to.

Certainly a union that involves annihilation of the self can gen-

erate annihilation anxiety. To give ourself up, to surrender ourself —in love or any passion—may feel to us like loss instead of gain. How can we be so passive, so possessed, so out of control, so . . . won't we go crazy? And how will we ever find ourselves again? Consumed by such anxieties, we may establish barricades, not boundaries. Shutting ourselves away from any threat to our inflexible autonomy. Shutting ourselves away from any experience of emotional surrender.

Yet the yearning to restore the bliss of mother-child oneness—that ultimate connection—is never relinquished. All of us live, at some unconscious level, as if we had been rendered incomplete. Though the rupture of primary unity is a necessary loss, it remains "an incurable wound which afflicts the destiny of the whole human race." And speaking to us through the dreams that we dream and the tales that we create, images of reunion persist and persist, and persist and persist—and bracket our life.

> The force behind the movement of time is a mourning that will not be comforted. That is why the first event is known to have been an expulsion, and the last is hoped to be a reconciliation and return. So memory pulls us forward, so prophecy is only brilliant memory —there will be a garden where all of us as one child will sleep in our mother Eve. . . .

3

Standing Alone

This plant would like to grow
And yet be embryo;
Increase, and yet escape
The doom of taking shape. . . .

—Richard Wilbur

Oneness is bliss. Separation is dangerous. And yet we pull and pull and pull away. For the need to become a separate self is as urgent as the yearning to merge forever. And as long as we, not our mother, initiate parting, and as long as our mother remains reliably *there,* it seems possible to risk, and even to revel in, standing alone.

To crawl from the lap of paradise, and explore.

To stand erect on two feet, and walk out the door.

To leave for school, for work, for a married life.

To dare to cross the street, and all the continents of the earth, without our mother.

The poet Richard Wilbur addresses our oneness-separateness conflict in his little poem about plant, and human, development. And while Wilbur clearly acknowledges the urge to remain inchoately attached, "something at the root," he writes, "more urgent than that urge," presses outward.

It is the striving to be a separate self.

But separateness is, ultimately, a matter of inner perception, not geography. It rests on the knowledge that I am distinct from

thou. It recognizes the boundaries that restrict and contain and limit and define us. It is linked to a core of self that cannot be altered or taken away like a piece of clothing.

Becoming a separate self is not a sudden revelation but an unfolding. It evolves, slowly slowly slowly, over time. And during our first three years, in predictable stages of separation-individuation, we venture upon a journey as momentous as any we will ever take —the journey out of oneness into separateness.

All subsequent departures from the familiar to the unknown may stir up echoes of this original journey. Alone in a strange hotel room, far from everyone we love, we may suddenly feel endangered and incomplete. And every time we move from the safe to the risky, expanding the boundaries of our experience, we will—in our act of breaking away—repeat some of the joys and terrors attendant upon that initial loss:

When we discovered the heady freedom and the panic-stricken aloneness of human separateness.

When we embarked on what psychoanalyst Margaret Mahler has termed our "psychological birth."

Our psychological birth begins at around five months of age, when we enter a stage called differentiation: A time when we display a "hatched" alertness. A time when we form a specific child-mother bond. And a time when we draw our body away from the body of our mother in the dawning recognition that our mother, and indeed an entire world, exists outside our boundaries —to be looked at, to be touched, to be enjoyed.

Stage two, at nine or so months, is an audacious practicing time when we start to physically crawl away from our mother, continuing, however, to return to her as a bountiful home base from which we obtain "emotional refueling." It is scary out there in the world, but we must practice our newfound talent for locomotion —and besides, there are all these marvels to explore. And as long as mother is there as a body to touch, as a lap to lay a weary head in, as a here-I-am-and-you're-fine encouraging smile, we exuberantly continue to expand our physical universe and our self.

Practice makes perfect, crawling yields to walking, and at this momentous point in the practicing stage, upright locomotion permits such vistas, such possibilities, such triumphs, that a child